Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism

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the workforce, they are still objectified quite often in society, as can be seen in the designations of unmarried women in their late twenties as "leftovers," and prostitutes as a "cancer of society." It is fascinating to compare twenty-first-century China with the late Qing period Widmer depicts. In the first generation, Wang Qingdi was a free spirit with an enthusiastic ambition for the fulfillment of her talent, even though society did not value woman's talent in writing. And in the second generation, we have much to learn in contemplating Zhan Xi's acknowledgment of women's abilities and Zhan Kai's admiration of women's power, portaying courtesans as the leading heroines. Interestingly enough, all those courtesan characters could be traced easily to their prototypes in real life, making it uplifting and intoxicating for a female audience nowadays to read, "women can affect China's future in important ways" (p. 147). Widmer finds a perfect angle, a perfect family, and a perfect era to produce a genuinely feminist literary family history.

Finally, to borrow Zhan Kai's line, "Women, take heed!" (p. 230).

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Ka-ming Wu. *Reinventing Chinese Tradition: The Cultural Politics of Late Socialism.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. xv, 186 pp. Hardcover $85.00, ISBN 978-0-252-03988-1.

Ka-ming Wu's book consists of three rather clearly demarcated parts, each of which offers an ethnographic account of a traditional cultural practice in contemporary rural Yan'an. Everyone familiar with China knows Yan'an, in Shaanxi Province, as the site from which the Chinese Communist Party expanded its power across the country. It remains today a rather poor region in which some folk practices have survived longer than in places with more rapid change. Of these, Wu discusses paper cutting, traditional storytelling, and the spirit medium cult of a female deity called Wangmu Niangniang.

By now, there are a number of studies by geographers and anthropologists on the revival, or rather reinvention, of local architectural, performing, and religious practices to cater to a burgeoning domestic tourism in China, mostly but not exclusively in ethnic minority areas. These studies generally find such reinvention

to be commercially driven and firmly outside the hands of traditional performers or craftsmen, who tend to be elderly and uneducated. Despite this, performances of local tradition create a way for rural, often minority, folk to recover a sense of self-worth and strengthen their hand in negotiating with outside investors and state authority, even as they simultaneously strengthen the local embedding of the state, for example by local Party officeholders becoming involved in temple associations.

Wu, too, sees the practices she documents as sites of interpenetration between state, market, and local agency, as well as urban intellectuals. But these practices draw few or no tourists and little commercial investment, and those engaged in them began doing so in the Maoist era. Paper cutting had been discovered and embraced by Communist intellectuals back in the Yan'an period as an ancient, "pure" folk art form that was nonetheless close to the artistic ideals of the Republican-era Left, influenced as it was by 1920s European woodcuts, Russian naive painting, and other avant-garde schools. Traditional storytelling, like *chastushki* (folk ditties) in the Soviet Union, was adapted as a propaganda tool, and storytellers became "cultural workers." Their performances were put up by work units and focused on the propaganda needs of the time. Spirit mediums did not, of course, operate openly under Mao, but they are older women whose social relations were shaped during that period. (Wu dates the revival of spirit medium sessions to the 1990s, but in an area of rural Hebei where I did research, the government issued an "opinion" to prohibit such activity as early as 1978, suggesting it must have acquired some presence in the immediate post-Mao years.)

Market reforms, then, affected these practices in ways rather different from the tourism-driven entrepreneurship that characterizes, for example, the ethnic minority regions of Southwest China or the "water towns" around Shanghai. Yan'an's place in this new rush for commodifiable heritage has been defined by "red tourism," but this has been of no consequence to the practitioners studied by Wu. The inscription of northern Shaanxi paper cutting in UNESCO's intangible world heritage list generated a brief period of top-down enthusiasm, as art historians from the capital resignified paper cuts from proletarian art to ancient heritage. A professor from Peking was instrumental in setting up a Folk Arts Village, which enjoyed some autonomy from the administrative village and recruited skilled women to produce paper cuts for sale, freeing them from agricultural work. This resulted in a shift of household power toward women and a more lively communal life. The commercial success was just enough to improve women's lives and prompt some of the younger ones to think about moving away to a nearby town, but not so big as to trigger mass migration or an influx of tourists. After a few years, the county government's priorities changed, and a paper-cutting boom never took place.

The storytellers have fared worse. Almost all of them blind old men, they continue to be engaged by work units. Their performances now combine current

propaganda, promoting the latest buzzwords of corporate "personnel work"—such as quality control—and traditional storytelling. But performances have become rarer, and in order to eke out a living, storytellers have to press human resources departments for engagements using the language of the socialist state's responsibility for the disabled, rather than that of cultural heritage. Storytellers do make additional money by traveling the countryside, often on foot, and performing rituals, for example, those to protect babies from illness, in households and at temple fairs. Yet even as they do so, their official authorization as "culture workers" is an important source of legitimation.

Spirit medium sessions, too, are performed in houses, but although they are common on certain feast days, they entail some secrecy, at least toward outsiders. The mediums summon deities and ask them to heal illnesses or bring fortune to the household. Moreover, Wu argues intriguingly that adherents of particular spirit cults get to know each other's households and difficulties closely and therefore form intimate communities, perhaps not unlike Christian house churches. These sessions form "occasions for the expression of disappearing rural communal relations" (p. 27), a reconfiguration of a rural subjectivity even as it is on the point of vanishing. For this reviewer, this part of the book was the most fascinating; unfortunately, it is also the shortest.

Despite the book's title, then, and although Wu "found it fascinating to think about folk discourses and practices as actively manufactured" (p. xi), the story she tells is less about manufacturing and more about continuity. Wu's principal arguments are that folk traditions are integrated into Party-state propaganda, that they blend with tourist-oriented commodification, and that they are actively reenacted by villagers to create a new form of rural identity (p. 5). It is really on this last point, in showing how some not-yet-dead, now-revived practices are locally meaningful yet not or minimally commercialized, that her book offers some fascinating perspectives complementary to other studies. This reader was left wishing for more detail as well as wondering how these vanishing occupations have fared in the ten years since Wu did most of her research. There is no mention of younger men taking up storytelling or younger women becoming mediums, and only the occasional one of young women learning paper cutting in the hope of going away to make money. Unlike pop-and-polyester ethnic minority dancing or crafts, which have developed into businesses thanks to investment by outsiders but have very little to do with living traditions, there seems to be no future for these occupations.

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